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United States
Department of
Agriculture

Food Safety
and Inspection
Service

Meat and
Poultry Hotline
1-800-535-4555

Making the Connection:

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline, 1994



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Table of Contents

Introduction	<i>i</i>
Accomplishments	1
Reaching a Broader Audience	1
Hotline Users as a Focus Group: Caller Surveys	2
Ready-Prepared Meals Campaign Enters Second Phase	3
Caller Concerns	4
Foodborne Illness	4
Food Handling	4
Food Labeling and Nutrition, Diet, and Health	6
Newer Technologies	7
Statistical Summary	8
Call Volume	8
Hotline Callers	8
Callers' Home States	8
Source of the Toll-Free Number	11
Types of Inquires	11
Subject of Inquiry	11
Foods of Interest	11
Call Management	15
Operations	15
For More Information	16

List of Figures

Figure 1: Hotline Callers 1994	9
Figure 2: Hotline Callers' Home States 1994	10
Figure 3: Source of Hotline Telephone Number, 1994: First Time Callers	12
Figure 4: Subjects of Inquiry, 1994	13
Figure 5: Foods Named in 1994: Product-Specific Inquires	14

Introduction

Since 1985, consumers with food safety questions have turned to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's toll-free Meat and Poultry Hotline. Calls are handled by a team of home economists, registered dietitians, and food technologists. Most questions handled by the staff concern safe storage, handling, and preparation of meat and poultry products in the home.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is sponsored by USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS). The hotline enables consumers with questions or problems related to meat and poultry, or foodborne illness, to communicate promptly and directly with FSIS. By emphasizing actions that will lower the risk of foodborne illness, the specialists who answer the hotline phones assist FSIS in protecting and improving the public health.

In addition to providing food handling guidance, the hotline informs the public of the role regulatory agencies play in assuring food safety by responding to questions on labeling, food additives, meat inspection, and many other related topics.

Hotline staff also impart nutrition information and answer basic nutrition questions based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans, seven principles representing the best, most current advice from health and nutrition experts for healthy Americans 2 or more years of age. The hotline's nutrition education component complements its food safety goals by helping callers select meat and poultry products wisely, so that foods, when safely prepared, offer the fullest possible health benefits.

This report summarizes the accomplishments and activities of the Meat and Poultry Hotline between January 1 and December 31, 1994. Information about the number and type of calls to the hotline is also provided.

Accomplishments

Reaching a Broader Audience

Seasonal Information Kits. Changes consumers make in their food handling behavior as a result of contact with the Meat and Poultry Hotline benefit all those for whom the consumer prepares and serves food. Conversely, individuals who lack knowledge of proper food handling may adversely impact the health of many in the community. Recognizing this ripple effect, the Meat and Poultry Hotline has always disseminated information on foodborne illness prevention through the media and through educators. In 1994, the staff undertook a major initiative to provide to these audiences camera-ready, consumer-oriented material addressing specific concerns voiced by hotline callers.

These materials were provided in the form of packages, each containing several articles, with a seasonal theme. Four packages were distributed on a quarterly basis to 200 magazine food editors and 1,500 newspaper food editors.

Beginning in the fall, the same materials were sent to a list of 4,700 subscribers, including Cooperative Extension System specialists, educators, health professionals, health and science editors, consumer affairs professionals, and others who indicated an interest. Many of these readers formerly subscribed to FSIS' *Food News for Consumers* magazine, which ceased publication in 1993.

Media Outreach. The Meat and Poultry Hotline continually develops educational news features to provide timely food safety information to the general public. Over the course of the year, 15 features were distributed through USDA's press service. Nine video news releases were issued for use by television news directors, consumer reporters, etc. Stations generally obtain these via satellite, but many requested tape copies.

The hotline also used the North American Precis Syndicate (NAPS) to distribute features. Those issued in 1994 covered keeping holiday foods safe while traveling, managing community picnics, and keeping foods cold when the power fails, in addition to a food safety quiz. NAPS distributed these features to virtually every newspaper in the country and documented their use by many papers.

Twice during the year, radio stations were sent one-page bulletins with sample interview questions related to a single topic. Approximately 35 stations responded to a flyer referencing safe handling labels on not-ready-to-eat meat and poultry products. In November, 82 stations booked interviews to discuss preparing Thanksgiving dinners in a safe manner.

Special mailings were used to establish dialog with particular constituencies. In 1994, groups targeted were African American newspapers, other food-related toll-free telephone services, and cookbook editors.

Routine Media Contacts, Interviews, and Speeches. Many news organizations and information offices initiate contact with the Meat and Poultry Hotline while researching or writing stories. The total number of media contacts in 1994 was 733. The greatest portion of these were with newspapers and magazines (23 percent each), followed by radio (20 percent) and television (8 percent). The remaining 26 percent of contacts were with information officers representing a wide variety of public and private concerns.

The hotline director appeared on several network, syndicated, and cable television shows: ABC's "Good Morning America," "Live with Regis and Kathie Lee," a Cable News Network news program, and the Discovery Channel's "Home Matters." Television news organizations that filmed the hotline in operation included NBC News, the MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour, the TV Food Network, Cox Broadcasting, and NHK (Japanese public television). Local television stations also interviewed the hotline's managers.

Members of the hotline staff also disseminated information while attending professional meetings on the state, regional, and local levels and national meetings of the American Dietetic Association and the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences (formerly American Home Economics Association). Staff delivered numerous presentations to other groups of educators and consumers.

Hotline Users as a Focus Group: Caller Surveys

The Meat and Poultry Hotline is valuable not only to its clients but to FSIS and USDA. Callers become a type of "focus group," allowing the staff to gauge concerns relative to certain issues. The hotline has limited authority to survey its callers in addition to answering questions, and in 1994, surveys provided valuable feedback in several key areas.

Thermometer Survey. In March, the hotline surveyed food thermometer use among its callers. Cooperative Extension specialists who participated in designing the survey concurrently surveyed grocery store shoppers in New York and Colorado. Among those surveyed, there was an almost even split between thermometer users (49 percent) and non-users (51 percent); furthermore, only one-fifth of the thermometer users stated that they use their thermometer for all meats.

After looking at the results, examining reasons why callers said they used or did not use thermometers when cooking, and evaluating comments on a draft brochure, the hotline planned an educational campaign to increase thermometer use. Planned activities include finalizing a consumer publication, making the publication available where thermometers are sold, and reaching out to the media and consumers with information on the advantages food thermometers offer.

Attitudes and Perceptions of "Fresh" Poultry. An informal survey of 200 callers was one vehicle FSIS used in 1994 to reexamine its policy for use of the term "fresh" on poultry product labels. Callers surveyed indicated

that they generally associate the term "fresh" with product not being frozen. About half of the respondents directly related "fresh" to never frozen or recently slaughtered. About 85 percent believed that "previously frozen" did not equate with "fresh." Three-fourths of the shoppers tried to buy fresh chicken, many because they perceived the quality to be better than frozen chicken.

After analyzing information gained from public hearings, research studies, a review of the available scientific literature, and the hotline survey, FSIS issued a proposed rule revising its policy on use of the term "fresh."

Measuring Customer Satisfaction. In keeping with the Administration mandate that agencies of the federal government become more customer-driven, providing customer service equal to the best in the business, the hotline staff conducted a comprehensive review of its programs and delivery of services. Internally, front-line employees identified procedures in need of improvement, using methods which included rating various aspects of Meat and Poultry Hotline operation against comparable government and private hotlines. However, most of the information used to formulate new customer service plans was gleaned from a mail survey.

The survey was mailed to 500 callers over a period of several weeks. Sixty-two percent, or 310 of the 500 surveys mailed, were returned and tabulated. The vast majority of respondents said they were "very satisfied" with the service overall and would call the hotline again. Immediacy of response and helpfulness of staff were major factors in callers' decisions to use the hotline again.

Responses and comments concerning interaction with staff, benefit of referrals given, and use of the automated system supported several recommendations concerning staffing, technology, and publications delivery. These were presented to management and will be acted upon in the coming year.

Ready-Prepared Meals Campaign Enters Second Phase

In 1993, the hotline convened an interdisciplinary working group for the purpose of developing handling advice applicable to ready-prepared holiday meals. Increasingly, restaurants, caterers, and grocers are selling these convenience products hot, refrigerated, or frozen to consumers. Based on its findings, the group developed a brochure that was widely used; the brochure was later revised and updated based on comments received. Approximately 8,000 reproducible master copies of the revised brochure were distributed in 1994 through the National Turkey Federation, Food Marketing Institute, National Grocers Association, and the Cooperative Extension System.

Based on demand for this information in a concise, easy-to-use format, the hotline began work on a similar publication concerning take-out foods in general.

Caller Concerns

Callers' concerns covered a broad spectrum of issues regarding not only food handling but the causes of foodborne illness, the effects of foodborne illnesses on health, labeling and nutrition, and applications of newer technologies in food processing as well. Following are some examples of frequently noted concerns.

Foodborne Illness

E. coli O157:H7. Preeminent among pathogen questions were questions about *E. coli* O157:H7. This virulent bacterium gained national attention in 1993 following an outbreak of illness in the Western states that affected hundreds of people. The public health threat remains, and so, consequently, does consumer anxiety. Meat and Poultry Hotline staff handled approximately 500 *E. coli* calls in 1994. Handling and preparation of ground beef—the product most often associated with *E. coli* O157:H7—was most often the focus of the calls.

Salmonella. *Salmonella* was the other major concern in terms of foodborne pathogens. In particular, consumers wanted to discuss the risks in consuming lightly cooked or uncooked egg products. To a lesser extent, callers were concerned about the sources and levels of salmonella present on raw poultry.

Food Handling

The vast majority of questions to the Meat and Poultry Hotline were related to storage, preparation, and handling of foods in the home. This has historically been the case. Most hotline users are individual consumers, and these are the circumstances they control directly. Specific examples follow.

Cutting Boards. For the second consecutive year, choosing and caring for cutting boards and other food contact surfaces was a hot topic. Over the course of the year, staff noted approximately 1,000 inquiries related to all types of appliances and kitchen equipment. Of these, 170 were specifically cutting board questions. Debate centered around which material, wood or a non-porous material such as plastic, is less conducive to bacterial growth. Callers also had detailed questions on cleaning and sanitizing surfaces.

Safe Handling of Cooked Foods. Some of the most common errors in foodborne illness outbreaks involve the handling of cooked foods (inadequate hot holding, improper cooling, etc.). Often hotline staff were called upon to explain how and why those errors may lead to illness. For example, a March 1994 report in *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Review* (a publication of the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) described two outbreaks of *Clostridium perfringens* gastroenteritis following St. Patrick's Day meals in Ohio and Virginia during 1993. Traditionally, the week before St. Patrick's Day is the peak period for

corned beef questions on the Meat and Poultry Hotline, and media reporting on these outbreaks greatly increased the number of corned beef calls and served to focus the calls on critical processes.

Ready-Prepared Meals. Partly as a result of the Agency's educational campaign (see p. 3), the hotline again received a significant number of handling questions pertaining to meals assembled for consumer convenience by caterers, restaurants, and groceries. In 1994, the hotline began to see a trend toward callers' use of these products throughout the year for a variety of occasions.

Food Storage. A sizable portion of the hotline's calls were related to proper storage of meat and poultry products in the home. Storage, in addition to being one of the most popular topics, was one of the most misunderstood. Callers tended to overrate the influence of storage times on safety and to confuse safety considerations with quality considerations.

Some callers, when deciding how long to store foods, looked for some sort of date on the package. Often, however, the package date further confused the issue. Callers asked questions regarding requirements for open product dating and the meaning of various types of dates (use-by, sell-by, etc.). For 1994, as in each of the past several years, approximately 1 percent of the hotline inquiries recorded were related to product dating.

Food Safety On the Go. One of the hotline's most important tasks was to help callers make wise decisions about handling and preparing foods to be eaten away from home—perhaps out-of-doors. These questions encompassed activities such as picnics, camping, barbecues, and potluck suppers. The number of such questions was highest during the summer months (as, for a variety of reasons, is the incidence of foodborne illness). Because grilled hamburgers are a picnic staple, questions about outdoor cooking were often tied to *E. coli* O157:H7 concerns.

Safe Cooking Procedures and Internal Temperatures. As consumers sought to follow instructions such as the "cook thoroughly" statement found on the safe handling label, they turned their attention toward specific cooking methods and procedures. One well-defined safety issue was that of recommended end-point temperatures for meat and poultry products. Closely related to this issue were questions of how to judge doneness, and whether the degrees of doneness recommended by various sources took safety into account as well as personal preference.

Holiday Food Safety. November and December were, as usual, the busiest months in the Meat and Poultry Hotline calendar. Twenty-nine percent of the year's incoming calls were received during that 2-month period.

During the holiday season, callers reported cooking larger quantities and entertaining more. Food editors typically provide toll-free numbers in their holiday issues to assist readers in these endeavors. Therefore, FSIS aggressively promotes food safety information as it pertains to traditional celebrations to ensure that consumers with safe handling questions are aware of the Meat and Poultry Hotline. Because of the heightened

expectations surrounding holiday celebrations, even the most basic of calls presents a guaranteed teachable moment.

Most questions through November 1994 pertained to Thanksgiving dinners: guidelines for purchasing turkey, taking prepared foods to other sites, the safety of many cooking methods and recipes, and recommended storage times. In December, these concerns were joined by questions on buffet service, handling special entrees including hams, rib roasts, and goose; and on safe handling of food gifts sent or received. Egg safety was another concern prevalent at holiday times; particular recipes calling for eggs were evaluated in terms of potential to cause salmonellosis.

Emergency Situations. The handling of foods and kitchen equipment after a power failure and/or flood was another of the year's top concerns.

Food Labeling and Nutrition, Diet, and Health

Food labels changed significantly in 1994. To help the public make informed dietary choices, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and FSIS developed similar regulations requiring nutrition labeling on processed foods. Although the Nutrition Labeling and Education Act of 1990 (NLEA) required nutrition labeling only on foods regulated by the FDA, FSIS worked with FDA to develop similar rules for meat and poultry to provide consumers with consistent information. Both the FSIS and FDA regulations took effect in 1994.

Labeling questions clearly demonstrated that hotline callers were indeed using the new nutrition labels to plan healthful diets, and particularly to reduce their intake of fats. Some of the questions were quite detailed and revealed an awareness of various controversies in dietary advice, e.g., the role of trans fatty acids in the diet.

In another significant development, an FSIS final rule of March 28, 1994, mandated safe handling instructions for those meat and poultry products that are not ready to eat. On this topic, however, hotline staff recorded far more calls from business and professional callers than from individual consumers (although it is possible that many of the basic handling questions posed by consumers came to mind when they noticed the new label).

Ingredient labels also caused concern among some callers who are concerned generally about "chemicals" in food and question the safety of particular food additives. Examples of such compounds are monosodium glutamate, sodium erythorbate, and nitrites. In a study "Cured and broiled meat consumption in relation to childhood cancer: Denver, Colorado (United States)," which appeared in the journal *Cancer Causes and Controls*, authors noted an association between childhood leukemia and frequent consumption of hot dogs (one of many cured products containing nitrites). While the scientific community urged caution, noting that the study was preliminary and the statistical relationship was not necessarily a cause-and-effect relationship, the hotline did receive several dozen calls from concerned parents and care-givers.

The meaning of "fresh" as applied to poultry was the subject of much controversy in 1994. The previous year, the state of California had passed a law limiting the term "fresh" on poultry sold in the state to product above 26 degrees F. Poultry producers outside California contended that the law was meant to restrict sales of poultry from other states. The U.S. District Court in California ruled against the state, saying federal rules preempt state regulations. The decision was upheld by the U.S. Court of Appeals. Debate continued; California legislators introduced legislation in Congress that was designed to achieve the same goals as the California law. Although the issue is one of food labeling—as long as product is held below 40 degrees F., there is no safety issue—the Secretary of Agriculture directed FSIS to examine its policy to see if it was reasonable and meeting consumer expectations. (See p. 2 for information on a caller survey.) On the subject of "fresh" versus "frozen" products, Meat and Poultry Hotline callers asked about definitions, qualitative differences, and their storage and handling concerns.

For the year, 5 percent of all inquiries dealt with labeling and nutrition.

Newer Technologies

BST. Early in 1994, a moratorium called for by FDA in its final approval of genetically engineered bovine somatotropin (BST) expired. As milk producers began using the recombinant BST, consumer wariness received widespread media attention. Even though the media reports dealt almost exclusively with milk, as opposed to any FSIS-regulated product, the Meat and Poultry Hotline talked with more than 150 callers about BST. These calls were generally of three types: requests for background information, statements regarding label declaration (mostly in support of it), and complaints from callers who opposed use of the compound.

Modernizing Meat and Poultry Inspection. FSIS is pursuing a broad and long-term, science-based strategy to improve the safety of meat and poultry products and to better protect public health. The approach has been described as "farm-to-table," since it involves improving the safety of meat and poultry at each step in the production, processing, distribution, and marketing chain. The inspection system of the future will incorporate scientific testing and systematic prevention of contamination. It will directly target and reduce harmful bacteria and build prevention of foodborne illness into meat and poultry inspection.

Though FSIS' Pathogen Reduction/HACCP (Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points) proposed rule was published in 1995, questions touching upon some of its key elements were noted in 1994. These key elements included microbial testing and antimicrobial treatments. For example, the hotline received a small number of calls in response to FSIS' approval of trisodium phosphate (TSP) applications for use in the poultry slaughter process. TSP has been shown to greatly reduce salmonella, leaving little or no residue on finished product. As rulemaking and the Agency's educational campaign progress, caller interest in meat and poultry inspection is expected to increase.

Statistical Summary

Call Volume

For the third year in a row, the Meat and Poultry Hotline received more than 100,000 calls. The grand total for 1994 was 125,450 calls. (This figure includes calls handled by food safety specialists and those handled by the automated hotline system, a menu-driven collection of recorded messages on a range of topics.)

The general trend over the 10 years of the Meat and Poultry Hotline's operation has been an increase in calls from year to year, and that trend is expected to continue into the hotline's second decade. However, the number of calls in 1994 was lower than the number in 1993 by about 9 percent. A first-quarter decline was expected in 1994 because the first quarter of 1993 (after the *E. coli* O157:H7 outbreak in the Western states) had been exceptionally busy. After the first quarter, call traffic came closer to the predicted levels. Calls in May, June, July, and August 1994 increased compared to 1993 levels. And the expected year-end upswing began in November, bringing the number of calls during the 1994 holiday season to within 600 of the previous year's mark.

Hotline staff did not speak with all 125,450 callers because some calls were received after hours and some callers opted to listen to recordings that addressed their questions. Therefore, the figures and conclusions in the rest of this report are based on data collected by hotline food safety specialists on calls during regular business hours. This sample consists of approximately 41,800 inquiries from 39,700 callers.

Hotline Callers

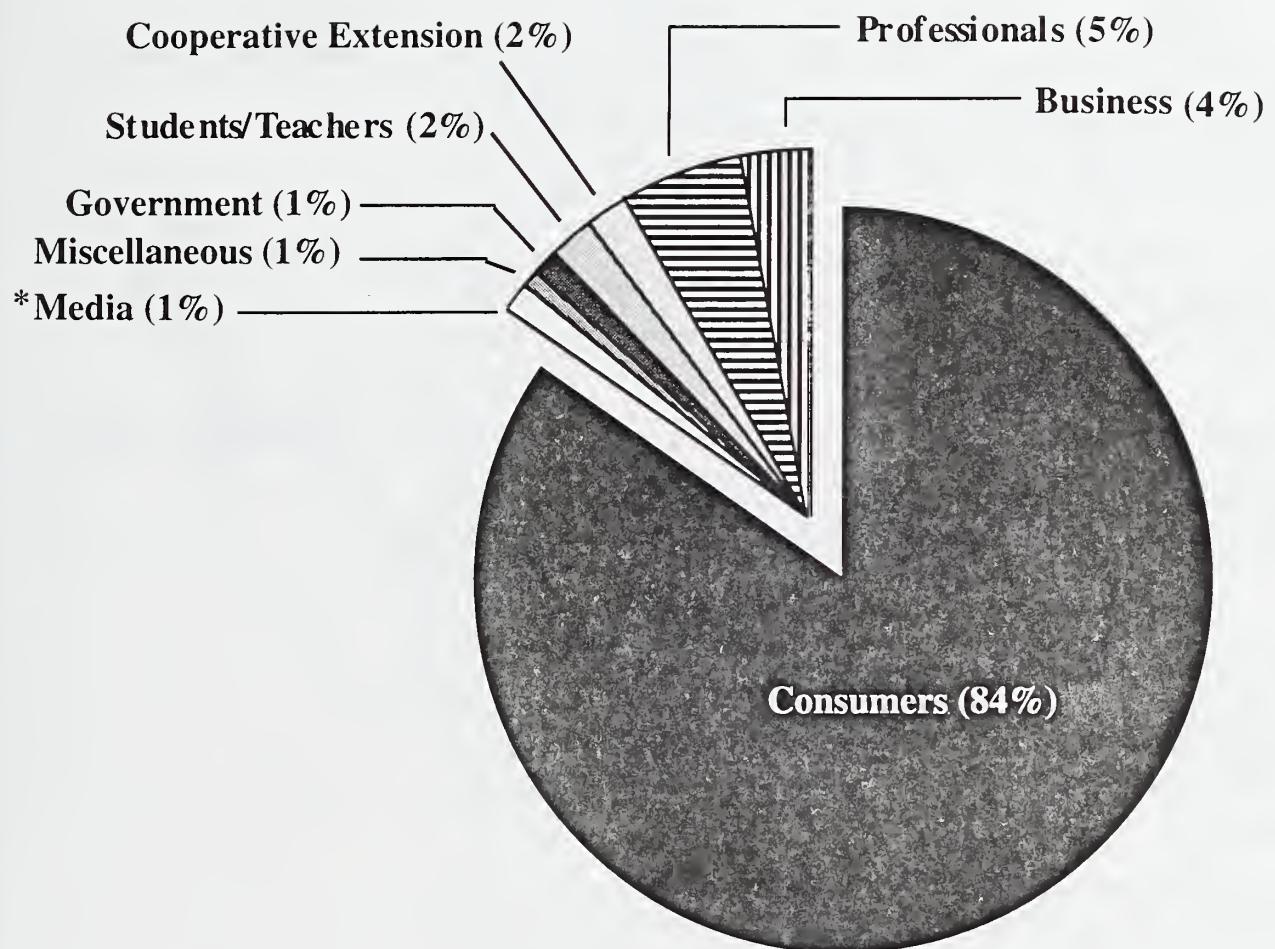
Primarily, the Meat and Poultry Hotline served individual consumers. However, staff also assisted thousands of educators, communicators, business people, government officials, food handlers, and providers of direct client service (registered dietitians, physicians, home economists, etc.). Sixteen percent of callers identified themselves as part of a specialized audience (see figure 1). (Media callers who contacted the hotline manager directly were not considered in the calculations for figure 1.)

The percentage of professional callers rose slightly from 4 percent in 1993 to 5 percent in 1994, as did the proportion of business callers (from 3 to 4 percent). Thirty-one percent of callers reported having called the hotline on a previous occasion.

Callers' Home States

Sixty-one percent of calls came from the Eastern United States (see figure 2), followed by the Central, Pacific, and Mountain regions. Calls came from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, U.S. territories, and several foreign countries. The states of New York, California, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Florida were the top call producers. Also among the top 10 states were Illinois, Texas, Michigan, New Jersey, and Massachusetts.

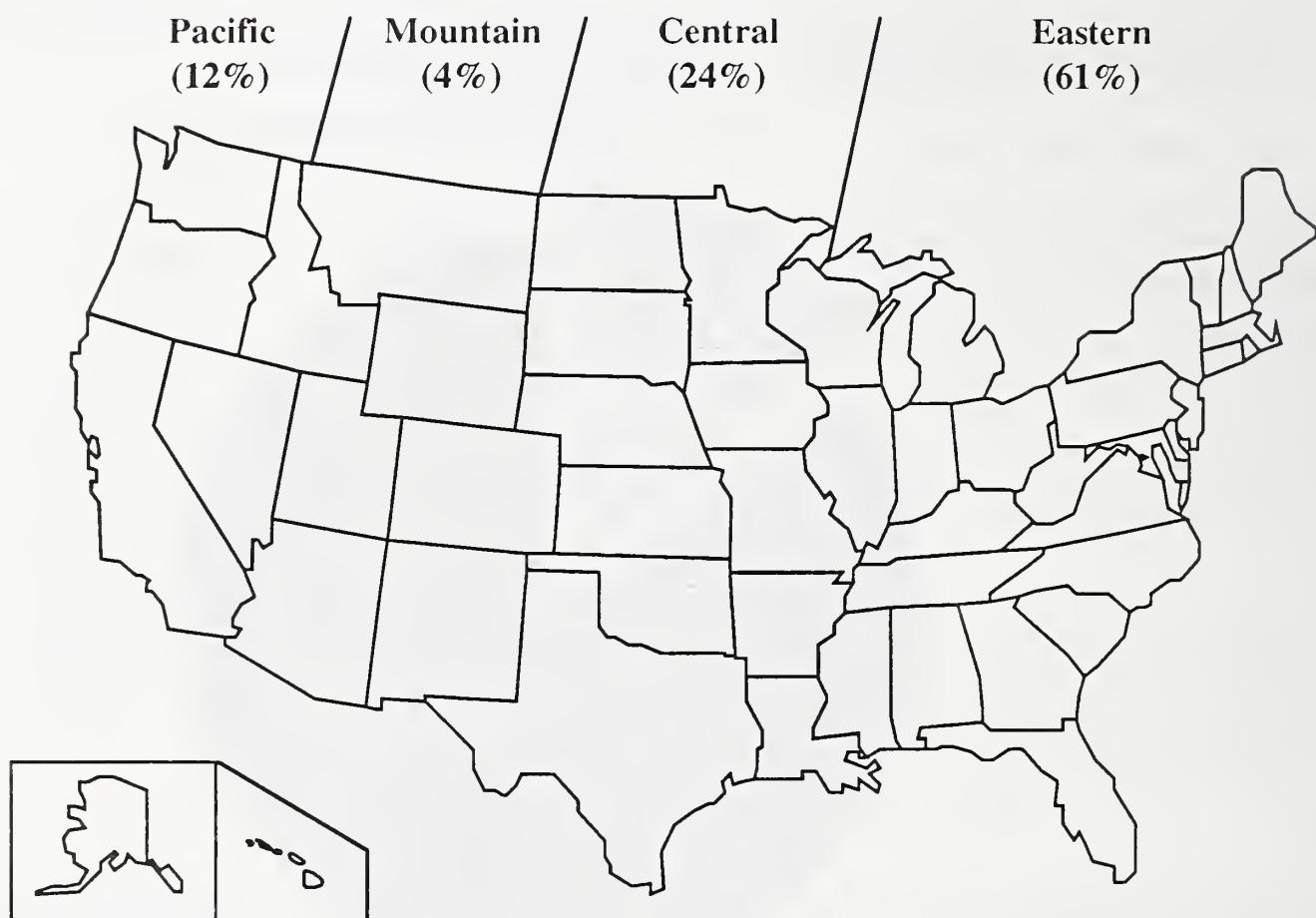
Figure 1: Hotline Callers 1994



Rounding may influence sum of percents to other than 100%
N=39,636

* calls to 800 or local hotline numbers only

Figure 2: Hotline Callers' Home States 1994



N=38,990

Rounding may influence sum of percents to other than 100%

Source of the Toll-Free Number

The means by which first-time callers learn of the Meat and Poultry Hotline stay fairly constant from year to year, with print media, specifically newspapers, being the most common. (See figure 3.)

Many callers learned of the hotline through FSIS publications or referrals from another USDA agency.

Types of Inquiries

Two percent of customer contacts were identified as complaints, either formal or informal, about food products, government policies, or industry practices. Complaints of a general nature, referring to some condition in the marketplace, outnumbered formal, or agency-investigated, complaints almost 3 to 1.

Allegations of foreign objects were most frequent in the formal complaint category and alleged illnesses ranked second. Complaints about practices in a store or restaurant were most common among informal complaints.

Subject of Inquiry

Seventy-three percent of hotline inquiries involved the basic food science concepts that dictate safe food handling, storage, and cooking procedures (see figure 4). Among these, questions of storage and handling (freezing and thawing, refrigeration, shelf life, power failures, etc.) predominated as is usually the case.

Callers were also interested in the food industry and the technologies used by food producers and regulators. This segment, which comprised 10 percent of all inquiries, included questions and concerns about product formulation, product recalls, meat and poultry inspection, agricultural chemical use, food biotechnology, food additives, cooking equipment, and food packaging.

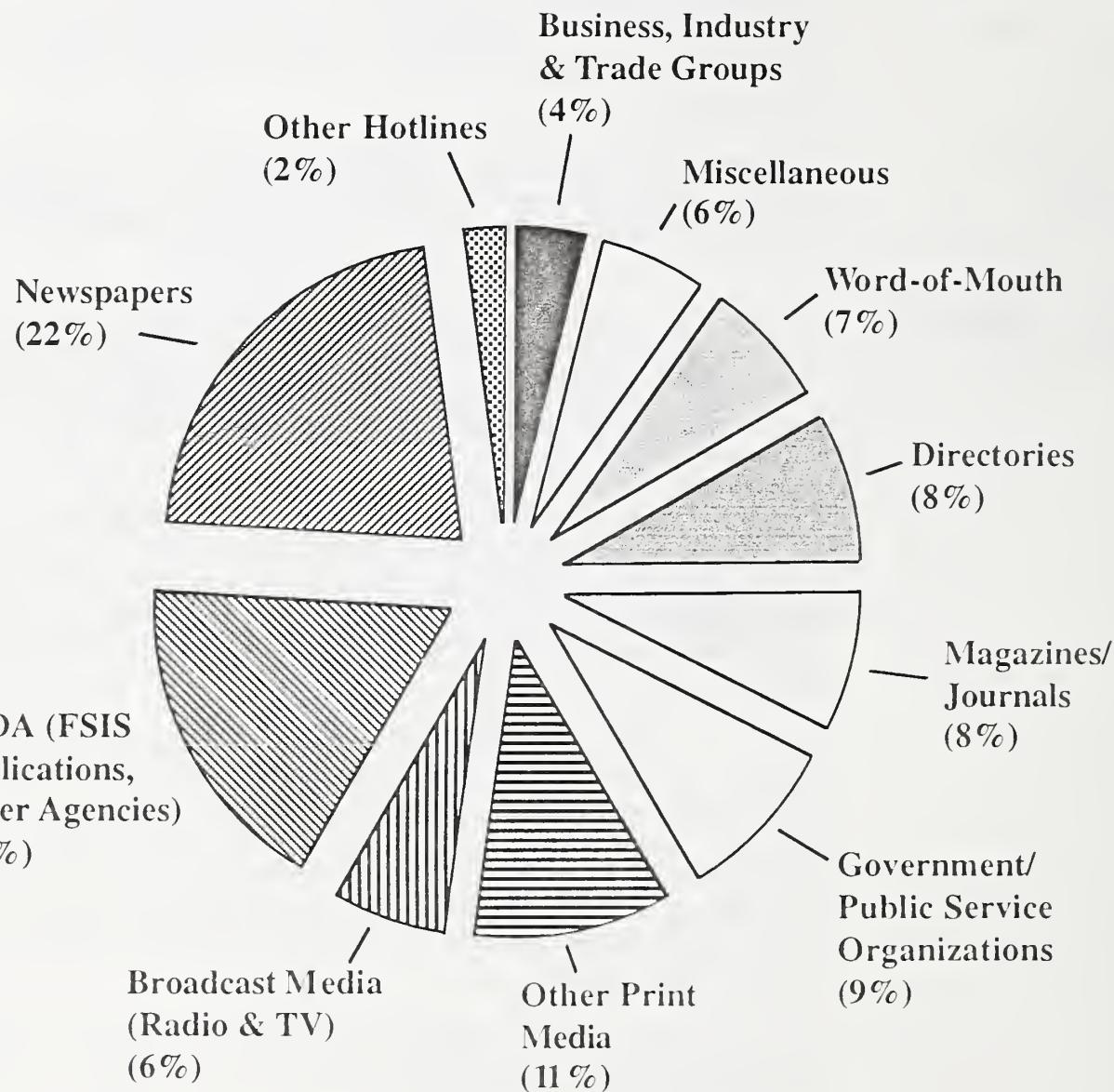
Reports of unusual, unsatisfactory or faulty products, or questionable practices in foodservice establishments and retail stores (including many of the formal complaints, product appearance, taste, texture, or odor questions, etc.) accounted for 7 percent of hotline calls. Half of these questions arose when callers found the appearance of the food to be questionable. In most cases, consumers were noting natural phenomena, such as dark coloration near the bones of young poultry or a brighter hue in oxygenated red meat.

Five percent of inquiries pertained to dating, labeling, and nutrition. Miscellaneous topics, some beyond the scope of the hotline, comprised the remaining 5 percent of inquiries.

Foods of Interest

Most inquiries (78 percent) were specific to a particular product or group of foods. Nearly half of all product-specific questions involved turkey, chicken, or beef. (See figure 5.) Emphasis on particular foods varied seasonally, with turkey calls prevailing around the holidays and chicken calls predominating in the summer months when outdoor cooking is popular.

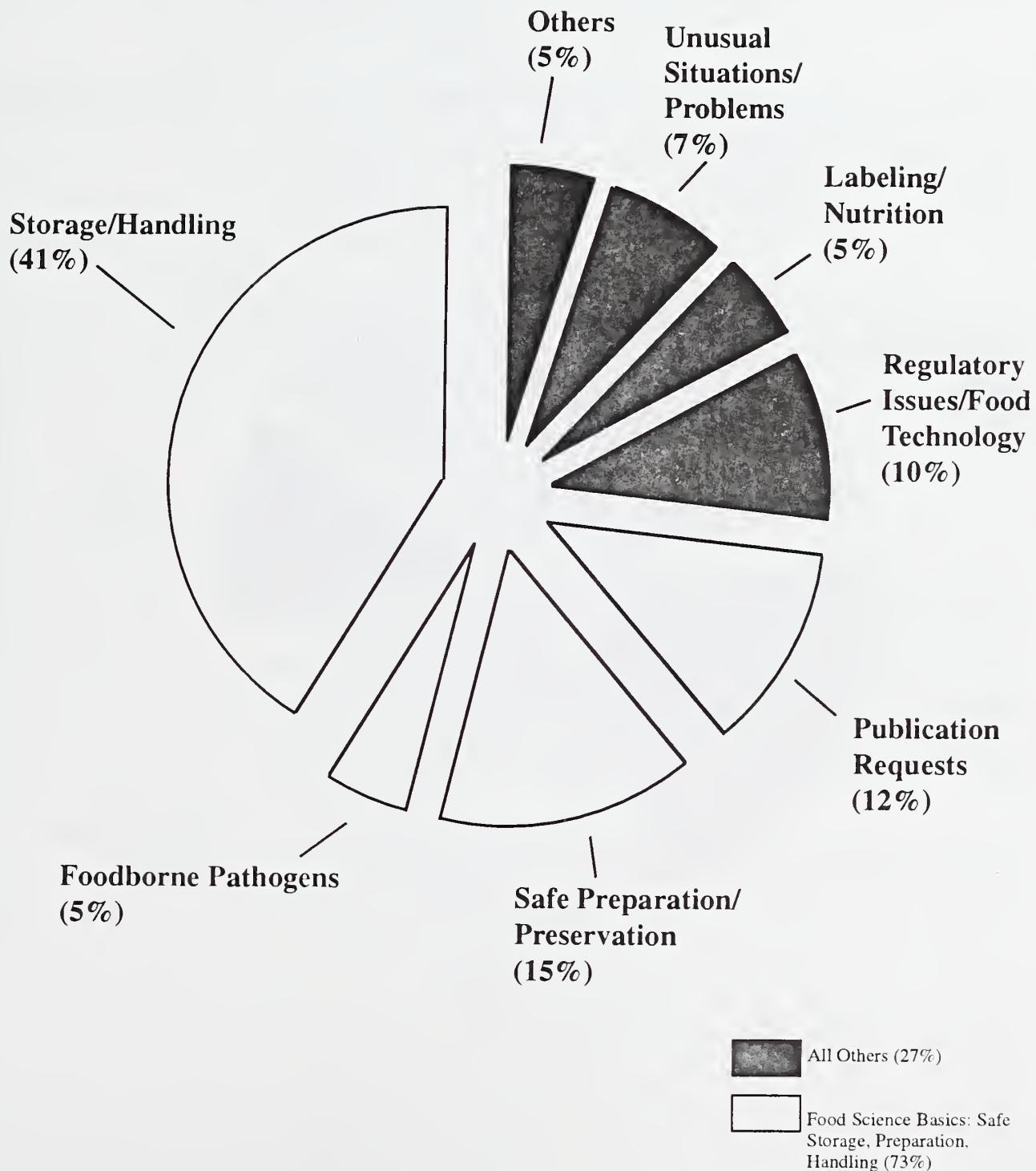
Figure 3: Source of Hotline Telephone Number, 1994: First Time Callers



N=27,506

Rounding may influence sum of percents to other than 100%

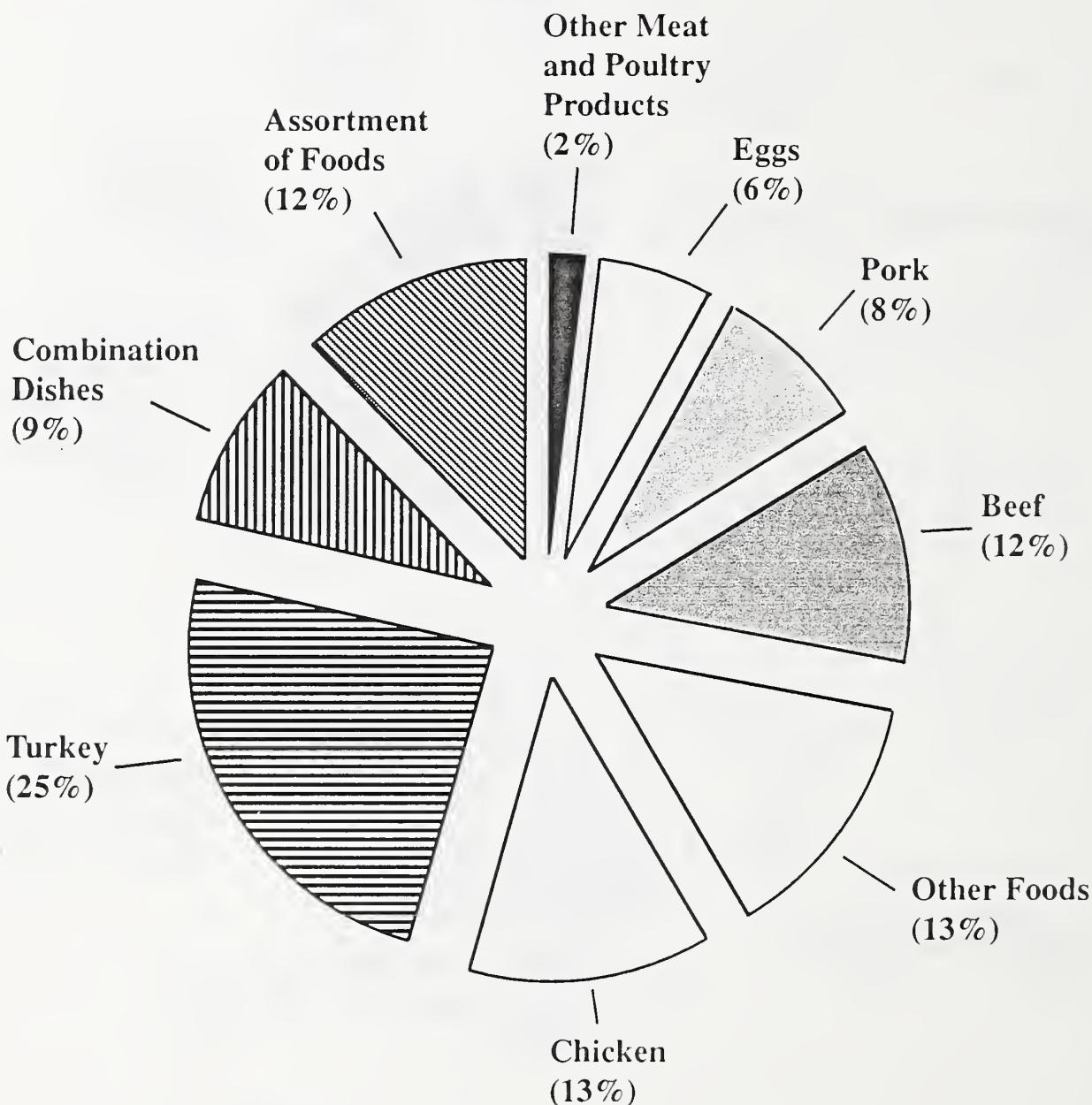
Figure 4: Subjects of Inquiry, 1994



N=41,828

Rounding may influence sum of percents to other than 100%

**Figure 5: Foods Named in 1994:
Product-Specific Inquiries**



N=32,827

Rounding may influence sum of percents to other than 100%

Because FSIS' primary responsibility is meat, poultry, and—since recent reorganization—some egg inspection, most calls to the hotline involve those foods. However, because the principles of safe handling are the same for all foods, the hotline does address questions on other products. To further FSIS' public health mission, the hotline teaches consumers how to handle all foods in a safe manner to reduce the risk of illness. Questions about foods other than meat and poultry products are referred to the responsible regulatory agency when necessary.

Call Management

In 1994, 88 percent of callers' questions and concerns were handled by hotline food safety specialists, nearly all on the first contact. Of the remaining inquiries, 3 percent were referred within FSIS, 3 percent to the Food and Drug Administration, 1 percent to health departments, 1 percent to Cooperative Extension, 1 percent to trade associations, and the remainder to a variety of other offices.

Questions beyond the hotline's purview are referred to the FSIS staff or outside organization best able to handle them. Referred questions may be matters requiring action by the agency with legal jurisdiction or questions of a highly technical nature.

Operations

In the past year, hotline staff continued to assume numerous responsibilities in addition to answering consumer calls. To support the main mission of the hotline, each staff member served as subject-matter expert on specific topics. This entailed conducting research, attending professional meetings and seminars, establishing relationships with experts across the country, and developing materials for consumers and reference materials for in-house use. As a result of these efforts, hotline staff were often asked to consult with other offices, agencies, and organizations on consumer education projects.

The hotline also developed its own training materials and scheduled in-service workshops as necessary. Staff trained and educated constituents in addition to hotline callers by giving speeches and presentations at conventions, professional meetings, and in a variety of other settings.

The Meat and Poultry Hotline staff currently consists of the Director, a Public Affairs Specialist, a Management Analyst, a Supervisory Technical Information Specialist, seven part-time and five temporary-intermittent Technical Information Specialists, and a Secretary. The staff includes nutrition and home economics teachers, public health and community nutrition experts, consumer advisors, microwave cooking and appliance specialists, food journalists, and registered dietitians with nursing home and hospital experience.



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For More Information

USDA's Meat and Poultry Hotline may be reached by calling 1-800-535-4555 (202-720-3333 in the Washington, D.C., area). Callers may speak with a food safety specialist from 10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. weekdays; recorded messages are available at all times.

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To file a complaint, write the Secretary of Agriculture, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Washington, D.C., 20250, or call (202) 720-7327 (voice) or (202) 720-1127 (TDD).
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